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Give and Take

Review of

No such thing as a Free Gift. The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy. Verso. By Linsey McGoey.

It was just after the Celtic Tiger had stopped congratulating itself. And it was just before another period of global Irishification became property crisis in being. Richard Murphy, “the 7th most influential person in global tax in 2013”¹, interpreted the events for his audience. This author was amongst them.

Tax policy doesn’t only send economic signals to investors, Murphy counselled. It also provides moral instruction to citizens, he continued. To play it fast and loose with tax was to play it fast and loose with morality. And so, in a way, the Irish kind of got what was coming to them. This pained him personally because he too is a Murphy. And so it was OK for him to say such things. The testimony paused. Most eyes went downwards. The oration encouraged reflection upon a truth in the process of revealing itself to its auditors. The guy could really talk.

But his audience could also talk back. And it did. Do not argue in favour of tax, a Wharton MBA sweatshirt wearing man gruffly countered, without acknowledging the historically authoritarian pedigree of your position. Health care, education and a living wage *can* be understood as basic human rights, he conceded, but the Gates Foundation represents a serious alternative to the naïve aspirations underpinning welfare state buttressed ideology. If tax policy is your solution, he sneered, that can only mean that you’ve misunderstood the problem. The guy really couldn’t be talked at.

What followed was the sort of squabbling that produces little other than boredom: polarisation, *ad hominem* speculation, and mutually resentful retrenchment, in other words. Missives, rather than interactions; axioms, rather than arguments; speeches, rather than discussions: all give, no take.

No such thing as a free gift shows how much could have been negotiated between that non-dialogue’s antagonists. The book’s cautious, erudite and empirically derived analysis of how much has already fallen to a complex mixture of private and charitable initiatives, and its persuasive account of why this trend will continue, incorporates aspects of both the tax-loving and the tax-hating extremes of contemporary political debate, without being reducible to either. McGoey actively foregrounds, rather than slyly conceals, many of the conflicting interests in play.

¹ <http://www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/richard-murphy/>

Her book is so far away from a hot-take machine as to seem almost redemptive. If you're looking for confirmation that the Gates Foundation is nothing but a tax dodge, or for confirmation of some even more conspiratorially grounded theory, then this book is not for you. But you should read it in order to find out why the discernible facts of the matter provide sufficient cause for collective political concern. We won't be able to understand what is going on for as long as the taxophiles and the taxophobes continue to hold court. McGoey's book turns the volume town on the noise in order to allow signals of what is really going on to emerge. It provides blessed release from all the tedious sermonising.

The Gates Foundation's now \$42 billion endowment (p. 25), McGoey submits, cannot be definitively exposed as a disingenuous sleight of hand. We should instead approach it as a fact which has lent itself to multiple explanations. In time adjusted proportional terms, Bill and Melinda Gates have donated much more of their personal wealth than *any* of their philanthropic predecessors or contemporaries. By far! This fact, too, has provided us with numerous interpretations. We would do well not to over-subscribe to any of these in advance and McGoey demonstrates why. In so doing, she puts us in a position to listen to the wide range of arguments which are presently on offer concerning the complex nature of contemporary philanthropy, its benefactors and its detractors. If you want to complain about contemporary philanthropists, in other words, it makes sense to give the various arguments for and against what they're attempting a fair hearing. Then you can have a go.

The Gateses, McGoey tells us, would be among the first to insist that contemporary philanthropy is fundamentally misunderstood as a yacht owners money throwing competition. What matters, they believe, isn't the quantity of money but the quality of results. And so the Gates Foundation, many a would-be critic is forced to concede in the face of the evidence, can boast of many important achievements, within numerous long under-funded areas. Not that contemporary philanthropy is primarily a matter of hubris or narcissism either. As far as McGoey can make out, the Gateses really are committed to, for example, eliminating polio, improving education, and feeding the starving. They earnestly see these as essentially good acts which deserve, indeed require, significant levels of personal sacrifice. Gates, as Ireland's Leather Trousered Philanthropist said, "gets shit done" (p. 6).

Not many people like to deal with other people's shit, of course, especially when there is so much of it. And so, *No such thing as a free gift* isn't an apology for the Gates Foundation, nor is it a defence of the recent upsurge in philanthropic foundations. The charges of tax evasion, of moral elitism, of megalomaniacal hubris, of semantic disingenuousness and of imperialist presumptuousness, all of which have been levelled against philanthropists, are each given a fair hearing within the book's introduction, and it's following three chapters. McGoey's lesson is as follows: while we can't ultimately rely on any one of these reductions, we cannot entirely rule any of them out either.

The Gates Foundation, it is put to the reader, is most accurately understood both as a continuation of, as well as a departure from, the earlier Foundations of the Carnegies, the Rockefellers and the Fords. The continuity strand of the book's analysis provides a helpful antidote to the pioneering pretences of contemporary 'TED Heads'. What they're doing, they

should realise, isn't actually that new. The historical discontinuity strand of the analysis, for its part, provides an even more helpful antidote to the sycophantic reception contemporary philanthropists often receive. While the very existence of earlier philanthropic foundations provoked considerable suspicion on the part of law-makers and democratic citizens alike, today's philanthropist, far from being an object of distrust, seems to have become a figure of praise. This prevalent atmosphere of philanthropic enthusiasm, McGoey argues, represents a significant proportion of what should worry us all.

It isn't the volume of the Gates Foundation's achievements or the integrity of its principal donor's motives which we should be scrutinising, therefore. What we should be really worrying about are the socio-political consequences of the increasingly embedded nature of non-elected interests within the deliberative processes determining the national and international provision of food, of health, of education, and of many other goods besides. This shift in emphasis, away from hermeneutics of concealed intentions and towards sociology of unintended consequences, is the book's all-important one. It marks a structural turning point away from philanthropy in general and onto the Gates Foundation in particular. It also marks an argumentative re-orientation wherein the discussion of particular complaints gives way to the delineation of a collective predicament.

So here's what matters most about the meteoric rise of the Gates Foundation, according to McGoey's book. When a politician messes up, democratic structures can, in principle, hold them accountable. When the Gates Foundation messes up, however, the public has next to no democratic recourse. This matters, more than ever, now that the range of responsibilities falling to the Gates Foundation has reached an unprecedented and expanding level. So the complaint made by Friedrich Hayek against state executives: too little public accountability compounded by too much executive discretion, could now be made against the contemporary institutional configuration of public, private and philanthropic executives, whatever we might call it. This argument, however, isn't democratically popular and it probably won't ever be. So if there is a conspiracy to be unveiled here, it is one which we are all already in on.

The Former British Prime Minister David Cameron ridiculed Richard Murphy's *Joy of Tax*. '64 positions and none of them work', the badly delivered punchline went. Despite the apparent antipathy between Murphy's earnest progressivism and Cameron's faux jocularity, however, the world occupied by the tax enthusiasts, on the one side, and the tax adversaries, on the other, no longer exists, if ever it did. Philanthropic foundations form a crucial dimension of the real world which the more vs less tax fantasy only serves to suppress. McGoey's book refuses the Left or Right, for or against, in or out soundbites. It takes the time to earn the right to polemicize and, having earned it, refuses to exercise it. The reality of embeddedness, it would seem, is much more complicated than any discernible polemic would allow for.

And so here we are: a series of ends which States had traditionally take responsibility for now presided over by private foundations. This should concern us all greatly. This does not concern us very much. McGoey is not offering us a dogmatic call to arms, much less a fatalistic counsel of despair. What she has provided is a gift which performative polemicists have all but stopped

us from expecting: a sociological account of the predominately unintended consequences of billionaire benevolence.

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